John Rogers

Death Valley's Unsung Hero of 1849

by
Jean & LeRoy Johnson
with
Ted Faye and Robert Ryan

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"John H. Rogers, like many other pioneers, has not received the smiles of Dame Fortune, and says that he 'will not need any pocket in his shroud, as he will take nothing with him,' when he goes over the divide. He was one of California's pioneers who assisted to develop the country and it will matter little if he has failed to acquire wealth."

William Lewis Manly, 1895

by

Jean & LeRoy Johnson

with

Ted Faye & Robert Ryan

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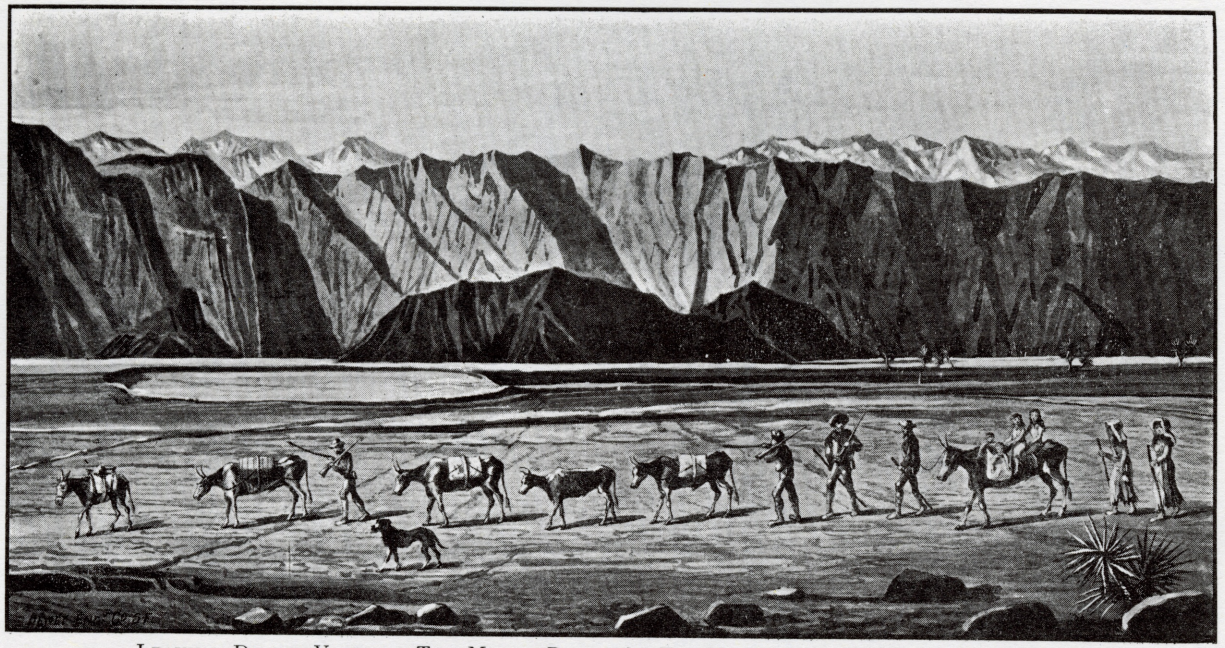


LEAVING DEATH VALLEY.—THE MANLY PARTY ON THE MARCH AFTER LEAVING THEIR WAGONS.

Manly drew the sketch for this picture in his book *Death Valley in '49*. It is the only known picture of big John Rogers (probably the tallest man). The scene is on the Mojave Desert. Arcan has thrown away his gun, the women's dresses are ragged, and there are Joshua trees in the background.

The year was 1885, and Tom Givens was a child when his father hired the old pioneer and Death Valley '49er John Rogers.

> I was only seven years old then, but I can remember Rogers and that mule. Father called her Jimble Jaw.... Her upper teeth overhung and never wore down, so they grew out to great length. Once a blacksmith cut them off with a hacksaw. Well, that old mule was a good saddle animal, but she had a rawhide mouth and an iron neck. Rogers was helping Father gather hogs.... The mule wanted to go on one side of a chaparral and Rogers wanted to go on the other side. The mule had an iron neck all right, but Big John had iron arms. He heaved on the reins and they compromised by piling up in the middle of that chaparral so tight that father had to put his reata on them and pull them out.[1]

One hundred years after John Rogers walked into Death Valley, historian Frank Latta searched the Merced area for traces of John's life after his desert trek, and he found John Flannagan, another old timer who rememberd Rogers:

> Yes, I knew Big John Rogers for many years. He was as fine an old pioneer as ever lived. He was a lonely old fellow, an old bachelor as long as I knew him, and I am certain that he had never been married. He was a '49er and had been connected with the Death Valley party, but I never knew him to more than mention it in speaking of the early days.... He was a big, powerful man,... as tall as six feet two or three inches, and he weighed more than two hundred pounds when I knew him. In spite of his crippled feet he would do a long day of hard, heavy work as well as anyone.... I never knew of him to drink at all. He was a kind, generous old fellow and a square shooter if there ever was one."[2]

John Rogers was a burly man from Tennessee, a quiet, gentle man with a dark complexion and brown eyes. William Manly, his partner through the desert, said, "he has a heart as big as the oxen we picked the bones of on the Desert."[3]

Elusive in written history, John Rogers deserves the recognition and praise of all who celebrate the best of California's history this 150th year after the travails of the emigrants who entered Death Valley and gave it its name.

John Haney Rogers and William Lewis Manly were equally heroic in their successful rescue of the Bennett and Arcan families from Death Valley in early 1850, having struggled into the valley in late 1849. But because Manly had his chronicles published monthly for three years in the late 1880s and also wrote a book about his sojourn to the California gold fields, we know a lot about Manly. But we know very little about John Rogers, and most of what we do know comes from Manly's book and magazine articles.

Although Rogers and Manly were physically a study in contrasts, both held the values that made California a great state—self reliance, physical strength, determination, dedication, compassion, trust, honesty. These qualities were exemplified in their selfless act of hiking over 600 miles out of and back into the desert (nearly dying of thirst and almost starving to death) to keep their promise to rescue the two starving families awaiting their return. It is one of the classic stories of the west.

Rogers was big, tall, and dark whereas the census records reveal Manly stood 5 feet 7 or 8 inches tall. A neighbor who knew Manly as an old man said he was "a small man, about 5 feet 4 inches in height, bent over and walking with a manzanita cane held in a palsied hand, palm outward. His eye was clear and keen with a snow-white beard and his mind was like a basket, filled only with the events of his trip through Death Valley."[4]

During their desert trek, both Rogers and Manly wasted away to little more than skin and bones. John Colton, a young Jayhawker who also crossed through Death Valley, said that when Manly "found our trail, and came into our camp, trying to get out [of the desert], and get succor for the women and little children, he was a skeleton, but did not look older than 25 years, but he had the nerve of a catamount."[5]

We know nothing about John Rogers' life before 1849 except Manly's comment that he was a capable butcher and hailed from Tennessee.[6] He was about 26 when he ventured to California where he remained after his harrowing trek through the desert.

John began his migration to the California gold country as a wagon driver for a man named Dallas, and when the train reached the Missouri River, Manly also hired on as a teamster. Manly was supposed to have traveled with Asabel Bennett and his family from southwest Wisconsin, but Manly had gone up the Mississippi River to find a suitable Indian pony for traveling, and when he returned, the Bennetts had already departed taking all of Manly's gear with them.

After crossing the Rocky Mountains, Mr. Dallas announced he would set the men adrift in Salt Lake City to fend for themselves all winter. After considerable discussion, seven of them decided to navigate the Green River to the Pacific Ocean. As ridiculous and reckless as this decision may seem to those who have traveled the west, their decision was based on information they had at hand in 1849 as well as on faith in their own abilities. These emigrants had seen the government-published maps of Fremont's expeditions, which clearly showed the Green and Colorado rivers as the main arteries of the west, and they were familiar with the navigable, placid, rivers of the east. They had just crossed the dreaded Rocky Mountains via South Pass and found them benign and unthreatening. Based on their own experience, (and the discovery of a sunken boat in the Green River), it seemed perfectly logical to float to the Pacific Ocean.

Manly was elected captain of the group due to his extensive wilderness experience and excellent hunting skills. At one point on the river trip, Rogers butchered an enormous elk that Manly shot. The antlers were so large that with the tips stuck in the ground, the men could walk under the skull.

After an exciting but nearly disastrous trip down the turbulent Green River, the voyagers encountered the Ute chief Walkara who explained with sign language that they would perish if they continued down the Colorado River. Rogers, Manly, and three others took the chief's advice, purchased two young horses from him, and hiked cross-country toward Salt Lake City.

Rogers and Manly grew to respect one another as their strengths and weaknesses were exposed during their trials on the Green River trip and cross-country trek.

At Hobble Creek, 45 miles south of Salt Lake City, the men came across a large rendezvous of wagons preparing to travel south into California via part of the Old Spanish Trail. In this train Manly was astonished to find the Bennett family, his friends from Wisconsin, whom he was supposed to have met at the Missouri River several months before.

This put Manly in the rare position of having fresh clothing and money when most travelers had worn out or spent what they had with them. Manly joined the Bennetts and asked that John Rogers travel with them also. Feeling well off, Manly turned over his money to the remaining three Green River companions who had come cross-country with him.

While on the trail west from the Missouri River, the Bennett family (Asabel, Sarah, and their three young children George, Melissa, and Martha) met the Arcan family (John, Abigail, and little Charley).[7] The year had advanced to October when they finally reached Salt Lake City, and there was general concern that the emigrants would be caught in the Sierra Nevada snows that decimated the Donner party two years before. However, a Mormon elder, Captain Jefferson Hunt, had recently brought a single wagon from Los Angeles northward to Salt Lake, and he agreed to lead a train back on that route. He warned the travelers about the long, dry trail and that they might lose some of their animals.

As often happened in large trains, dissension broke out after about seven weeks on the trail, and when a map of a purportedly shorter route to the gold fields appeared, most of the emigrants decided to try this route even though none of them had been over the ground or knew anything about the route.

When their forward progress was halted by a deep chasm southwest of today's Enterprise, Utah, most of the

emigrants turned their wagons back to the Old Spanish Trail and followed Captain Hunt through to Los Angeles.

The four wagons of the Bennett and Arcan families were among the 27 or so wagons that continued west into the unknown desert.

Because Manly had no specific duties, he scouted ahead for water, Indians, and the general lay of the land—often accompanied by Rogers. The farther they traveled the harsher the landscape. After one scouting trip Manly returned to say that the country ahead looked bleak, and it would be another month before they saw any part of California. As it turned out, Manly had been optimistic. Late that night, Sarah Bennett sobbed with despair and told her husband "she felt that she and the children must starve" before they could get out of the desert.[8] On another occasion, someone stole scarce pieces of meat from their stew pot.

Day after day Sarah Bennett and Abigail Arcan "were nearly crazy, for they expected the children would choke with thirst and die in their arms, and would rather perish themselves than suffer the agony of seeing their little ones gasp and slowly die.... For the love of gold they had left homes where hunger had never come." Upon returning from another scouting trip, "there was great gladness when John Rogers and I appeared in the camp and gave the mothers full canteens of water for themselves and little ones, and there were tears of joy and thankfulness upon their cheeks as they blessed us over and over again."

Oxen that had been fattened, rested, and shod at Hobble Creek began to weaken. They "fared very hard ... and seemed hardly able to drag along.... They moved slowly and cropped disdainfully the dry scattering shrubs and bunches of grass.... Spending many nights and days on such dry food and without water they suffered fearfully.... No one knew how long before we might have to kill some of them to get food to save our own lives." It wasn't long. "Our animals were so poor that one would not last long as food. No fat could be found on the entire carcass, and the marrow of the great bones was a thick liquid, streaked with blood resembling corruption." By the time the emigrants reached

Death Valley, the oxen had worn out or lost their shoes, and the men made booties for them from the green hide of their fallen brethren.

After all the company arrived in Death Valley (some sooner than others), Manly ventured 20 miles north to see how the Jayhawkers, Georgia/Mississippi boys, and others were faring. He found them slaughtering their oxen and burning the remaining wagons to reduce the poor meat to jerky.

On his way back to his small train of seven wagons, Manly succinctly stated his (and John Rogers') situation:

> If I were alone, with no one to expect me to help them, I would be out before any other man, but with women and children in the party, to go and leave them would be to pile everlasting infamy on my head. The thought almost made me crazy but I thought it would be better to stay and die with them, bravely struggling to escape than to forsake them in their weakness.

Mr. Fish, Isham, and a couple of men traveling with them parted from the Bennett-Arcan party to join the northern contingent and follow the Jayhawkers. As the Bennett-Arcan party headed south in Death Valley hoping to find a pass over the mountains for their wagons, the four teamsters decided to leave the families and also follow the Jayhawkers.

After an abortive attempt to cross what several men thought was the Sierra Nevada (really the Panamint Range) the Bennett-Arcan train congregated around a small well of water to discuss their plight. (This was about seven miles south of Bennetts Well.) The gathering included the Bennett and Arcan families, the Wade family, and several loosely associated men such as Nusbaumer, Hadapp, the Earhart brothers, and Captain Culverwell (whose death inspired the naming of Death Valley).

Bennett said, "I propose that we select two of our youngest, strongest men and ask them to take some food and go ahead on foot to try to seek a settlement.... I will take Lewis if he will consent to go ... [because] he would come back if he lived." The next man chosen was John Rogers, who also consented to go.

An ox was killed and its meat dried. They "packed seven-eighths of all the flesh of an ox " (Rogers said it was 21 pounds), and added a "couple of spoonfulls of rice and about as much tea." Rogers wore a thin summer coat but had no blanket. Manly took a light blanket but no coat or vest. Each had a tin cup and a small camp kettle that held about a quart. Rogers took a good double barreled shot gun and Manly had Bennett's rifle. Each carried a knife and wore a small-brimmed hat that would be inconspicuous to possible Indian scouts.

It was a sad parting, and the general opinion was, "If those boys ever get out of this cussed hole, they are d—d fools if they ever come back to help anybody."

Over the next two weeks, all the men in camp, except the Bennett and Arcan families, lost faith that the boys would ever return. They packed up and followed the Wades south, knowing that their only remaining food was on the hoof, and if they remained, they would eat the oxen and then starve to death.

Rogers and Manly saw signs of Indian habitation as they ascended the Panamint Range.

When Manly and Rogers reached the summit of the Panamints where they hoped to see into the rich San Joaquin Valley, they were overcome with crushing disappointment as the view exposed more mountain ranges with deserts between. As they looked back where they had traveled for so many weeks Rogers said, "Just look at the cursed country we have come over."

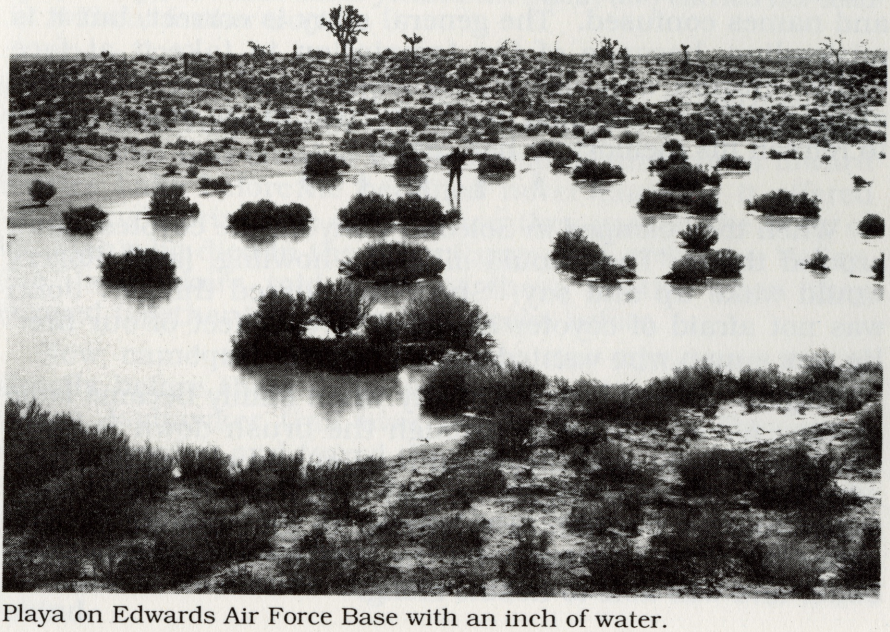
On their way down the steep western side of the Panamints they found enough water to drink and fill their canteens, but this was the last potable water they were to find for 3 days! "We seemed almost perishing for want of water, the hard exercise made us perspire so freely." They saw a stream in Panamint Valley and hurried to it "but the tempting fluid was as salt as brine and made our thirst all the more intolerable.... We had secured only two drinks since leaving camp.... We tried to eat a little meat, but after chewing a long time, the mouth would not moisten it enough so we could swallow, and we had to reject it. It seemed as if we were going to die with plenty of food in our hand, because we could not eat it."

LeRoy Johnson found thin sheets of ice in Indian Wells Valley 122 years after Rogers found similar life-saving sheets of ice.

They crossed the Argus Range west of Trona and entered Indian Wells Valley as the sun rose after a cold night. The nearest sign of water was snow to the north, so they headed toward it, "and it was quite a question if we could live long enough to make the distance." Soon Rogers "found a little ice that had frozen under the clear sky. It was not thicker than window glass.... We gathered just a kettle full, besides what we ate as we were gathering." With this melted ice, they cooked some of their poor jerked beef and returned to their trek southwest across Indian Wells Valley.

Rogers and Manly overtook the Jayhawkers camped at a fine spring now found at Indian Wells Restaurant on highway 395.

Since Walkers Pass was closed with snow, Rogers and Manly headed south to the Mojave Desert through Last Chance Canyon (where they found another contingent of Jayhawkers), and followed the Indian horse-thief trail to Desert Springs. The trail led south into what is now Edwards Air Force Base where providence again provided



Playa on Edwards Air Force Base with an inch of water.

playas with a thin layer of water. Along the way they found "the bones of animals, some badly decayed and some well preserved. All the heads were those of horses ... It was evident they had not been killed but had dropped along the way. It was a dreary trail at best, and these evidences of death did not help to brighten it in the least."

They crossed Soledad Pass on hard packed snow, and near Acton found "a beautiful little running brook of clear pure water, singing as it danced over the stones." Here they ate the birds Rogers shot—a quail: "as superb a morsel as ever a man did eat," a hawk: "pretty fair and quite good eating," and a crow: "its flesh was about as black as his feathers and full of tough and bony sinews.... I have heard people talk of 'eating crow' as a bitter pill; I think I know all about it from experience."

Although most of our information comes from Manly's accounts, John Rogers dictated his rememberances for a newspaper article in *The Merced Star* shortly before Manly's now-famous book *Death Valley in '49* was released in 1894.[9] John's account starts as the wagon train leaves Hobble Creek. It is extremely garbled, and incidences are mixed up and names confused. The general story is correct, but it is misleading, because of the temptation to take it at face value. Rogers was clearly reminiscing and not concerned about specifics. Nor had John returned to the desert region to refresh his memory as had Manly.

When they camped in Soledad Canyon, the coyotes slunk around them: "They would all go to howling, [and] Rogers would wake up and say, 'Shoot the cursed things!'" John was not afraid of coyotes slinking "twenty feet of our fire." He was a man who wanted a good night's sleep!

Rogers refused to leave Manly when Manly became lame as they forced their way through the brush down Soledad Canyon. Manly said they "had to stop and rest quite often. After a while I told Rogers he had better go on and I would follow just as I could. He refused to go, saying, 'We will either die or go together.' By the next morning I was some better and was able to hobble along."

Rogers and Manly were able to buy supplies and two horses from the Del Valle rancho (near today's Saugus). They procured a sack of yellow beans, a small amount of wheat, some good quality dried meat, and a few pounds of coarse, unbolted flour that the boys ground for themselves. As they started to leave, the lady of the house brought out four oranges and "pointed to her own child and then to the East, put them in the pack meaning we should carry them to the children."

On their hurried return to Death Valley, Rogers and Manly came across some road builders in San Francisquito Canyon. They gave the boys 25 pounds of unbolted wheat flour and sold them a poor little one-eyed mule and a white mare.

> This little beauty of a beast was broken to lead at halter, but had not been broken in any other way. Rogers said he would ride her where he could, and before she got to the wagons she would be as gentle as a lamb. He got a bridle and tried her at once, and then there was a scene of rearing, jumping and kicking that would have made a good Buffalo Bill circus in these days. No use, the man could not be thrown off, and the crowd cheered and shouted to Rogers to "Hold her level." [Finally,] the little beast yielded the point, and carried her load without further trouble.

When Rogers and Manly returned to Searles Valley (north of Trona), they turned aside from their eastern course to pay final respects to one of their fallen comrades, Mr. Isham, who had crawled miles on hands and knees toward Searles Lake before he perished never knowing it offered not a single drinkable drop. Then they passed the body of Mr. Fish who died in the Slate Range east of Searles Valley. The Jayhawkers told them of these deaths when they camped together two and a half weeks before.

Now came the decision: cross the Panamint Range directly before them or go far north and follow the much longer Jayhawker trail over the mountains. They were already overdue and feared the families may have despaired and left the valley without them. They had no time to spare; their choice must be to cross the mountain before them. But the sacrifice was great. The horses could not climb the dry falls in Redlands Canyon and sadly had to be left behind.

Could they get the little one-eyed mule over the formidable dry fall? They found a narrow shelve that wound its way high on the southern cliff wall. Manly was so nearly in despair that he could not help bursting into tears but "finally Rogers said, 'Come Lewis' and I gently pulled the rope, calling the little animal to make a trial."

> Carefully and steadily she went along, selecting a place before putting down a foot, and when she came to the narrow ledge leaned gently on the rope, never making a sudden start or jump, but cautiously as a cat moved slowly along.... Another step or two, when calculating the distance closely she made a spring and landed on a smooth bit of sloping rock below that led up to the highest crest of the precipice, and safely climbed to the top, safe and sound above the falls."

The little mule was fortunate she made it, since Manly "saw Rogers with a very large stone in his hand, ready to holler" should she falter. She carried the remaining wheat and flour and nibbled at anything growing along the way.

Oxjump Fall, the fall below Redlands Spring and the rugged southern slope over which the one-eyed mule gingerly made her way. The line is Harry Brigg's old water pipe.

After they reached the floor of Death Valley, Rogers suddenly stopped, staring at the ground. "Here is Capt. Culverwell, dead." They wondered how many more bodies might they find? It was still several miles to the camp where they had left the families 25 days before.

Finally they saw the wagons but saw no movement of any kind; they fired their guns as a signal, and to their overwhelming relief figures emerged from the shade of the wagons.

Now that Manly and Rogers had traversed 500 miles of desert, mostly on foot and with a sense of urgency every step of the way, they had to turn around and lead the families over the same rugged ground to safety.

The trials the families suffered are best left told by Manly. In summary, Rogers and Manly dealt with the oxen, often pushed ahead to prepare the night's camp, slaughtered an ox, prepared the dinner, and made booties for everyone including the remaining oxen.

Asabel Bennett and John Arcan helped Sarah and Abigail and the children. Abigail was by this time five months pregnant.[10] Little Martha, only two years old had come close to dying while in Death Valley, and she could no longer walk. Little Charley Arcan, also two, rode in the other pocket slung over the back of Old Crump, a steady ox with a bent horn. Rogers relates that:

> I got tired packing the babies so I took a long sack and fixed it so that it could be fastened on the ox. A hole was cut on each side like a pair of saddlebags and a baby was placed in each end. The little fellows would ride thus and sleep half of their time.

A few quotes from Manly gives a feeling for their intense suffering:

> The mothers ... picked out soft places on which to place their poor blistered feet at every step. They walked as if they were troubled with corns on every toe and on their heels into the bargain, and each foot was so badly affected, that they did not know on which one to limp.
>
> The women were so tired they were over two hours late.... When they reached the beds they fell at full length on them, saying their feet and limbs ached like a toothache.

> Little Charley Arcane cried bitterly all day [with a horrible rash] and almost all night.
>
> One of the women held up her foot and the sole was bare and blistered.... The women had left their combs in the wagons, and their hair was getting seriously tangled. Their dresses were getting worn off pretty nearly to their knees.... They were in a sad condition so far as toilet and raiment were concerned."
>
> [During a snow storm] we laid down as close as pigs in cold weather, and covered up as best we could but did not keep dry, and morning found us wet to the skin, cold and shivering.
>
> For breakfast in the morning we had only dried meat roasted before the fire, without water, and when we started each one put a piece in his or her pocket to chew on during the day as we walked along ... seeing not a rabbit, bird, or living thing we could use for food.

One can only imagine the relief the party felt as they emerged from brushy Soledad Canyon into the open and greening valley where Newhall now spreads. As Manly said, "I cannot half tell how we felt and acted, nor what we said in our delight over this picture of plenty. The strong contrasts created strong impressions, and the tongues so long silent in our dry and dreary trouble were loosened to say everything the heart inspired. Think as much as you can; you cannot think it all."

Rogers and Manly went with the Bennetts to the Pueblo de Los Angeles after the Arcans traded their two remaining oxen for guidance to the seaport of San Pedro where they hoped to get passage to San Francisco. As a token of his thankfulness for saving the lives of his family, John Arcan gave Rogers his silver watch and to Manly he gave a gold ring and his share in the little one-eyed mule.

After arriving at Los Angeles, John stayed with the Bennett family to help with the teams as they made their way north to the gold mines while Manly stayed in Los Angeles to work a short time for the Briers.[11] John mined up and down the Mother Lode before settling in Merced.

In 1853, Sarah and Asabel Bennett had another son, their fourth child, whom they named John Rogers Bennett in honor of the big man they so highly respected. Manly saw Rogers on a steamboat at Benicia in 1854, and apparently Rogers returned to the Merced area and

remained there most of his life although his obituary hints that he may have been the city marshal of Gilroy at one time.

John owned 80 acres southwest of Merced that almost touched the San Joaquin River. That area is now covered with cotton fields and other row crops. On April 13, 1868, John recorded the sale of his 80 acres for the sum of "One Hundred and Fifty Dollars, in Gold Coin of the United States of America."[12]

Frank Latta quotes his conversations with John Flanagan (84 years old in 1941), who knew Rogers after 1880. Flanagan had high praise for the old pioneer and added the following:

> Rogers had been salivated in the mines by breathing mercury fumes while retorting amalgam. Both of his feet were cut off at the instep. But that did not keep him from making a living. He was an excellent separator man. He tended separator on stationary threshing machines all over this country until they were replaced by combines.... Between harvest seasons he worked at carpentering or at any kind of mechanical work. He was a good mechanic. He always earned his way. He never sponged off anyone and he never accepted charity. He was a good butcher and used to slaughter for the Ellis family.
>
> John Rogers lived with the Ellis family for a number of years. Once their old homestead shack burned. Old man Ellis had about a dozen children and had no money with which to rebuild. Well, Rogers helped Ellis get together some material and he built Ellis another house, one with a stick and mud chimney.[13]

The Ellis acreage was at the corner of Chamberlain and Lone Tree roads southwest of Merced and about three miles southeast of Rogers' 80 acres. At the intersection of the two roads, a gnarled snag of the old lone tree still stands as a mute symbol of the pioneer who lived and worked so many years within its shadow.

Virgil Givens, a couple years older than Tom who remembered the mule story, knew Rogers as late as 1895. He told Latta:

> [Rogers] had a long beard and was badly stooped from long years of work in the mines and on the ranches about Merced and Mariposa. He was crippled....[His] feet bothered him as

long as he lived.... Rogers worked for my father for many years, the last time about 1889 or 1890. He was a good worker and a most reliable man. He did not drink. At least he was never a drunkard, as I remember nothing about his ever drinking.

Rogers hurt one of his feet the last time he worked for Father. He was cutting a limb off a tree and was depending on jumping to the ground when it fell. As he jumped, his foot slipped and he landed on the stump of another tree. This badly injured one of his crippled feet and it was never strong again.

When Rogers left Father the last time, he went back to Ellis and stayed there a long time, doing chores. The last time I saw him he came to Father's and was still limping on the injured foot. He was on his way to a hospital; I believe it was the county hospital in Merced. I do not know what became of him.[14]

It is possible John was on his way to the hospital for such an operation after Virgil saw him last. John's obituary said "a portion of his right foot was also amputated" in addition to his having "lost a portion of his left leg because of mercurial poisoning."

On January 14, 1895, John sent a man to Lewis Manly's home in Santa Clara to let Manly know his Death Valley compadre was still alive. Big John Rogers, as he was called, invited Manly to visit him, and in June of that year Manly went by train to Merced for a reunion where he found that John "like myself was an old man with a hairy face and walked with a cane." Manly told the touching story of their reunion in an article for the *Pioneer*:

On reaching the house, an old man hobbled out, supported by a heavy cane.... John looked me over, and after a short pause said, "Lewis, is this really you?" and I replied, "Yes, if you are John."... His eyes ran over as he grasped my hand the big tears rolling down his cheeks, for the lost was found....f

For two days and nights, Rogers and I rehearsed the story of our journey to California.... We called to mind the tortuous trail, the trip up the Platte River and down the Green River canyon, across Salt Lake Valley, and into Death Valley, where many of our party died of thirst and hunger, and where John and I came near losing our own lives in an effort to save the women and children, which we accomplished....

Our reminiscences included a thousand and one incidents of the journey, many of them pathetic, others romantic, and

> some laughable.... We dwelt upon the narrow escapes we had from dying of thirst, drowning, starvation, and Indians, told of the strange characteristics of our companions—many noble, others not altogether so, but in that respect, more than an average.
>
> Sad indeed were the recollections of our disaster in Death Valley, with women and children, and weak men, suffering for food and water, our wagons abandoned and our cattle perishing, with but little hope or prospect of obtaining relief.... Two days and nights were all too short for recalling all the interesting events of our eventful journey....
>
> John H. Rogers, like many other pioneers, has not received the smiles of Dame Fortune, and says that he "will not need any pocket in his shroud, as he will take nothing with him," when he goes over the divide. He was one of California's pioneers who assisted to develop the country and it will matter little if he has failed to acquire wealth. Already he leans heavily upon his staff and moves about with difficulty. We are old men now.[15]

The two old pioneers corresponded from time to time, and Manly wrote several times to Jayhawker John Colton that Rogers was well: "I had a letter from John H Rogers a few days ago he is still at Merced a poor old cripple"[16] In 1898 Manly wrote Colton: "So a good humanitarian who helped save women & children from starvation in 49 deserves pleasanter days as he leans on his staff & wanders along on the bank of the dark river & I know if he gets thare first he will becken us over."[17] Manly commented in a letter written in January 1900 that John had just written to him: "I received his picture a few days ago it took me some time [to] study over those early times & try & make the face of 41 years ago & now conform, youth & old age compared he writes me he thinks he is better looking tharn the picture he is called whare he lives big John Rogers."[18] It appears John still had his sense of humor.

In the census of 1900, John is listed as an uncle of David Ellis and apparently a member of his household along with David's wife and two children.

On February 5, 1903, William Manly died of a heart attack after having been confined to a wheelchair for a couple of years due to a broken hip. About three years later, his Death Valley partner Big John became a resident

of the county hospital at Merced. By this time John had lost the sight of one eye and the other was seriously deteriorating. We also know that despite a natural dementia of that age and time, John had made careful plans and was lucid to the very end. He followed through on his plans, about which he had told others.

Toward the end of the year, John became seriously ill while living at the hospital, and Dr. Castle cared for him from December 1.

Then, on December 29, 1906, the last Saturday of the year, Big John Rogers died. He was interred the following day with "Funeral services ... conducted by Rev. James Miles Webb [of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church]."[19]

In his earlier letter to Manly, John had provided his own epitaph: This respected pioneer "will not need any pocket in his shroud, as he will take nothing with him."

His sad obituary, found by Ted Faye and Robert Ryan, tells John's final, shocking story.

MERCED EVENING SUN

MERCED, CALIFORNIA, SATURDAY, DECEMBER 29, 1906.

JOHN ROGERS TIRES OF LIFE

ATTEMPTED SUICIDE FRIDAY AS A RESULT OF PHYSICAL INFIRMITIES

Overburdened with an abundance of physical ailments, John Rogers, a pioneer resident of this locality, slashed himself into ribbons with a razor at the county hospital yesterday in an attempt to end his troubles. He was found a few minutes afterward rapidly bleeding to death. His neck was gashed in six different places, though the blade had failed to touch a vital part. The desperate man had also inflicted three wounds upon each of his arms at the elbow joints. County Physician Castle was promptly summoned and after staunching the flow of blood stitched the wounds. Rogers is not expected to live, though today he seems to be gaining strength.

The unfortunate man is 84 years of age and was one of the first inhabitants of this locality. About a year ago he

was admitted to the county hospital and many times since then he has threatened to take his life. Rogers is an old time miner and in his younger days lost a portion of his left leg because of mercurial poisoning. A portion of his right foot was also amputated. The old man then lost one of his eyes, and to add to his troubles the sight of his other eye has of late been failing him. This fact preyed upon his mind and in conversation he often confided to his fellow sufferers at the hospital that as soon as he became totally blind he would commit suicide. Little attention was paid him, the statement being accredited to his wandering mind. David Matthews, the steward, however, was informed of the threat and only yesterday searched the old man and his quarters for weapons. Only an old knife was found, which Rogers used to cut tobacco, and which was so dull that it would be almost impossible to cut any tougher substance with it. He was allowed to retain that. But Rogers had cunningly concealed a razor in some mysterious place and it was that instrument which he used with such terrible effect a short time afterward. The weapon was his own property and he had never intimated that he possessed it during all the time he had been in the hospital.

While the physician was sewing the wound the old man begged to be allowed to die, though afterward he expressed sorrow at his act. "Old man Rogers" is known all over the county. It is said that many years ago he was city marshal of Gilroy.

Later— Rogers died about 1 o'clock this afternoon.

End Notes

1 Frank Latta, *Death Valley '49ers,* Bear State Books, 1979, p. 344. This was about 1885.

2 Ibid. p. 345.

3 Manly to Clay, Jan. 15, 1895. Letter. JA 647 Jayhawker Collection. All quotations from the Jayhawker Collection are reproduced by permission from The Huntington Library, San Marino, CA.

4 Lawrence Clark Powell. *California Classics.* Los Angeles: Ward Richie Press, 1971, p. 42.

5 John B. Colton. "Story of the Jayhawkers" *San Francisco Chronicle.* Feb. 15, 1903, p. 3.

6 Most records say John Rogers was born in Tennessee, but the Certificate of Death, California State Board of Health, December 29, 1906, states he was born in "Penn," in 1822 (Penn. should be Tenn.?). The death certificate makes John about 3 years older than other records such as the county register of voters, 1896, which indicate John was born in 1824 or 1825.

7 The name was apparently pronounced Arcane because that is how Manly and others spelled it. It was also spelled Arcain. However, Acan is the spelling on the family tombstones at Santa Cruz.

8 Unless otherwise noted quotes are from William Lewis Manly's book *Death Valley in '49*, 1894 or from his 1887-1889 serialized account in *Escape from Death Valley*, 1987, by LeRoy and Jean Johnson.

9 Rogers' account is found in *Escape from Death Valley*, 1987, by LeRoy and Jean Johnson.

10 LeRoy and Jean Johnson, *Julia, Death Valley's Youngest Victim*. 2nd ed. 1996.

11 The Briers followed the Jayhawkers north in Death Valley and arrived at the Del Valle rancho about a month before the Bennett and Arcan families.

12 Merced County book of deeds, p. 360.

13 Frank Latta, *Death Valley '49ers*, Bear State Books, 1979, p. 346.

14 Ibid. p. 345.

15 *Visit to a Pioneer*, July 15, 1995, from *The Pioneer*, a weekly newspaper published at San Jose from 1877-1904. In: *The Jayhawkers' Oath*, articles by William Lewis Manly edited by Arthur Woodward. p.43 & 45. 1949.

16 Manly to Colton. Oct. 1895. Letter. JA 630 Jayhawker Collection, The Huntington Library, San Marino, CA.

17 Manly to Colton. Jan. 17, 1897. Letter. JA 632 Jayhawker Collection, The Huntington Library, San Marino, CA.

18 Manly. Jan. 1900. Letter. JA 651 Jayhawker Collection, The Huntington Library, San Marino CA. Manly may have seen John as late as 1859 based on his "41 years ago" or he may not have subtracted correctly and meant 1849.

19 *Merced Evening Sun.* XXXVI No. 220 Monday Dec. 31, 1906 p. 3:2. Although the obituary says John was 84 years old, other information indicates his age as 81 or 82 when he died.

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